

Mohammed bin Salman and Religious Authority and Reform in Saudi Arabia

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D., Fellow, Center for the Middle East

Annelle R. Sheline, Ph.D., Zwan Postdoctoral Fellow, Baker Institute and Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance



In the eyes of some sections of the foreign policy commentariat and many of his international supporters, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) is a religious reformer working to degrade the influence of powerful forces in Saudi Arabia that have pushed Islam in a more conservative direction over the past 40 years, both within and beyond the kingdom. However, perceptions of MBS as a religious reformer rest on flawed readings of the history of the relationship between the reigning Al Saud family and the Wahhabi clerical establishment. The history of the modern Saudi state has shown that at key junctures where it could have acted otherwise, the leadership within the royal family has made decisions that maintained their political supremacy over and against any contestation from religious elites or individual clerics. If MBS seeks to substantially reform the religious sphere, he would need to target the kingdom's most powerful religious institutions, such as the Council of Senior Scholars. This has yet to happen.

This report analyzes the relationship between political and religious authority in Saudi Arabia. An opening section explores the nature of the political-religious pact that has positioned political authority above that of religion as the ultimate source of domestic power. A second section details the careful mixture of consensus and balancing of competing

interests that successive Saudi rulers have followed in a pragmatic and gradualist approach to socio-political development. Such policies enjoyed a measure of success in cushioning the impact of rapid economic modernization and guiding the kingdom through periods of great internal strain. Section three examines instances of religious pushback through the growth of the *Sahwa* movement in the 1990s. The meteoric rise of Mohammed bin Salman and the emergence of his "1979" narrative about "moderating" Islam is examined in section four, while sections five and six make the case that MBS is not in fact a religious reformer but instead has pursued changes more symbolic than substantive. This report ends by contending that, like his predecessors, MBS is using religion as a tool of political control, despite attempts by some supporters to claim he is reforming Wahhabism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The contemporary Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled since 1932 by King Abd al-Aziz Al Saud and his sons, is the third iteration of a Saudi state in the Arabian Peninsula. The first Saudi state, known as the Emirate of Diriyah, took shape in 1744 when Prince Mohammed bin Saud of Diriyah joined with Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an Islamic scholar from Lower Najd (corresponding to today's Riyadh),

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to create a politico-religious entity aimed at ridding Islam in the Arabian Peninsula of heretical practices and deviations. Abd al-Wahhab was the author of *Kitab al-Tawhid* (the Book of Monotheism), which aimed to take Islam back to its pure and unadulterated roots, thereby forming a core component of the Salafi movement. Mohammed bin Saud and his descendants expanded the Saudi state well beyond its Najdi heartland and at its height, the first Saudi state covered a region extending from Yemen in the south to Aleppo and Palestine in the west and Karbala in modern-day Iraq to the north.¹

The first Saudi state collapsed in 1818 after a series of British attacks on Saudi territory and a final Egyptian assault on Diriyah. It was quickly replaced by a second Saudi state, the Emirate of Najd, which lasted until 1891, when Abd al-Rahman Al Saud was defeated by the rival al-Rashid dynasty of Ha'il and forced to flee with his family, which included the young Abd al-Aziz. After finding refuge in Kuwait and regrouping, Abd al-Aziz Al Saud reconquered Riyadh in 1902 and began the process of unifying through conquest the remainder of Najd (1912) and the adjoining provinces of al-Ahsa (1922), the Hejaz (1925), and Asir (1930). In 1932, Abd al-Aziz proclaimed the merger of the Najd, Hejaz, and Asir into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, leaving him in control of the majority of the Arabian Peninsula north of Yemen, with the exception of the British-protected emirates of Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the Trucial States (today the United Arab Emirates) on the shoreline of the Persian Gulf.²

Many observers of Saudi Arabia attach significance to the "dynastic alliance" made by Mohammed bin Saud and Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1744 and see as its legacy a separation of responsibilities, whereby the Al Saud exercise political leadership while the descendants of al-Wahhab (primarily the al-Sheikh family) monopolize religious posts. However, the reality is more complex as Abd al-Aziz Al Saud and his successors have, in key moments, mobilized religion both as an instrument of power and as a source of legitimacy, each time using a strategy of co-optation that kept final responsibility for policy firmly within Al

Saud control. An early example occurred in the 1920s during a conflict with the *Ikhwan* (Brotherhood) movement. Abd al-Aziz undertook a campaign to settle the Bedouin and turn them into a fierce fighting force that greatly assisted the conquest of the Hejaz and al-Ahsa provinces. However, when the Bedouin *Ikhwan* rebelled against Abd al-Aziz's moderation of religious policy in the new territories, they were crushed in battle by the forces of the nascent Saudi state in 1929-30.³ When the agenda of religious conservatives conflicted with the centralization of control, Abd al-Aziz demonstrated that the House of Saud would not be constrained by the "dynamic alliance."

Fifty years later, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of religious militants led by Juhayman al-Utaybi represented "in many ways the sequel to the *Ikhwan* revolt of 1929" in the struggle over the speed and direction of Saudi modernization.⁴ Al-Utaybi's father had fought with the *Ikhwan* at the Battle of Sabala in 1929 that ended with their defeat by Abd al-Aziz's forces. His son became radicalized while studying in Medina in the 1970s and being exposed to the modernist lifestyle in Riyadh and other major Saudi cities. Juhayman recruited similarly disaffected Bedouin from humble backgrounds who were cut out of (and rejected) what they saw as the oil-fueled transformation of Saudi Arabian society. After taking control of the Grand Mosque, the militants released a list of their grievances with "Western" innovations, including television and women's education. They made personal attacks on the freewheeling activities of senior Al Saud princes.⁵

On this occasion, the Al Saud responded very differently to the direct challenge to the religious and political basis of their legitimacy than after 1930, when Abd al-Aziz had (militarily defeated and) marginalized the religiously conservative *Ikhwan*. After executing Juhayman and the other perpetrators, the royal family then proceeded to implement many of the rebels' demands. They did this through measures that refocused the role of religion in Saudi society. Measures taken included an increase in funding for religious universities, expansion of

the remit and size of the religious police, and further support for pan-Islamic organizations and causes, such as the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan. In addition, the emergence of post-revolutionary Iran and the decline in oil prices in the early-1980s challenged the Saudi regime's leadership of the Muslim world and its ability to provide for the economic welfare of its citizens. Faced with multiple threats to its political and religious legitimacy, the regime responded by slowing down the process of liberalization and granting more political space for Islamist activism.⁶

DOMESTIC BALANCING ACT

The episodes of domestic unrest described above illustrate how the House of Saud alternatively repressed and responded to criticism from the most conservative aspects of society. Following 1979, challenges posed to the religious legitimacy of the Al Saud, and concerns about the possibility of further unrest, lent an air of excessive caution to Saudi policy formulation, but decisions also reflected the lessons drawn by the Al Saud from these examples of internal contestation, as well as from the prolonged split within the royal family between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal between 1958 and 1964. Policies traditionally had to be weighed to assess their effect on the balance of familial power within the Al Saud, particularly in terms of appointments to senior positions, and to evaluate how they would be received by key elements of Saudi society. This balance of interests resulted in an element of fluidity in the constant process of decision-making as princely assessments of the policy landscape shifted over time and in response to events.

The delicate balancing act facing Saudi leaders (exacerbated by their reluctance to be rushed into critical decisions) was demonstrated by the August 7, 1990, invitation by King Fahd to host American-led military forces preparing to oust the invading Iraqi army from Kuwait. Following a meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, King Fahd made the decision to invite foreign troops on the promise that

American forces would leave the kingdom after the war.⁷

Aware of the need to reinforce such a momentous decision to station American troops in the Muslim holy land, the Saudi government asked the Council of Senior Scholars to legitimate the move through a fatwa. Initially, the Council, led by Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, the senior religious authority in the kingdom, refused to support the government's position, but after pressure the Council issued a fatwa on August 13, 1990, endorsing the king's decision.⁸ By so doing, the government alienated a significant portion of the Salafi establishment. Some members coalesced into the *Sahwa*⁹ ("Awakening") movement of religious-political activism, while others turned to more radical critics of Saudi policy such as Osama bin Laden, whose offer of the use of his Arab fighting force based in Afghanistan to repel Saddam Hussein had been rejected by the Saudi government in August 1990. Whether expressed through the *Sahwa* or al-Qaeda,¹⁰ the decision to rely on U.S.-led military support unleashed forces of domestic opposition that coursed through Saudi society for the remainder of the 1990s.¹¹

Religious elites became less harmonized upon the emergence of a new generation of religious scholars led by bin Baz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia until his death in 1999. The most important religious family in Saudi Arabia has been the al-Sheikh family, direct descendants of Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The al-Sheikh reaffirmed their ancestor's historic alliance with Mohammed bin Saud in 1744 by aligning themselves with Abd al-Aziz Al Saud following the recapture of Riyadh in 1902. Al-Sheikh family members became the backbone of the religious establishment of ulama (legal scholars) and the mutawaeen (religious police) until the death of Mohammed bin Ibrahim al-Sheikh, the supreme scholarly authority in Saudi Arabia, in 1969. Afterward King Faisal reorganized the religious establishment, eroding the al-Sheikh's influence. This trend was only partially reversed after the appointment of Abdul-aziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh as Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia in 1999.¹²

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Mohammed bin Salman has accumulated power to a degree unprecedented in modern Saudi history.

RISE OF THE SAHWA

The emergence of *Sahwa* dissent in the late 1980s and 1990s illustrated rising religious activism in the kingdom. Clerics such as Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali built upon King Fahd's deeply unpopular decision to host U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia to accuse the regime of hypocrisy. In 1994, al-Awda and more than 100 other *Sahwa* activists were imprisoned amid a regime crackdown.¹³ Following his release from prison, al-Awda and other religious figures reinvented themselves as Islamist intellectuals. They built a substantial public following, initially by distributing as many as 200,000 cassette recordings of individual sermons.¹⁴

The rise of social media posed significant new dilemmas for the Saudi leadership. With millions of followers on Twitter, al-Awda possessed a vast audience with whom he could communicate directly, bypassing attempts at state control or censure. al-Awda took advantage of this new platform when he released an open letter to King Abdullah in March 2013 that criticized the regime's response to the Arab Spring upheaval and warned the government that it could face the "spark of violence" if it did not address concerns over political detainees, poor public services, and perceived government corruption. al-Awda released the open letter on Twitter through a series of tweets, each designed to carry a self-contained message that maximized its impact through onward sharing.¹⁵

Whereas in the 1990s, the Saudi government responded to the challenge posed by the *Sahwa* by arresting and imprisoning dozens of *Sahwa* leaders and their followers, including al-Awda himself, the majority were released by 1999 and kept a lower public profile thereafter.^(new: fn 116) The fact that al-Awda (and others) returned to activism in such a direct manner in 2013, coupled with the politically unstable regional context following the Arab Spring, meant that after 2015 Mohammed bin Salman was less inclined to open any space to groups in Saudi society that might conceivably pose a political—more than religious—threat as he consolidated power.

MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN AND THE "1979" NARRATIVE

Since his father, King Salman, appointed him defense minister in January 2015, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has accumulated power to a degree unprecedented in modern Saudi history, first as Deputy Crown Prince from April 2015 and later as Crown Prince from June 2017. MBS leveraged his father's backing and the passing of the old guard of senior Al Saud figures to cement his control over defense, economic, and oil policy through the creation of a Presidency of State Security and a Committee of Economic and Development Affairs, and a restructuring of Saudi Aramco's governing arrangements. This concentration of power has struck many observers of Saudi Arabia as a decisive shift away from the informal system of checks and balances that previously had prevented any one leader from exercising truly autocratic control. That equilibrium had evolved more by accident than by design due to the embedded strength of the institutional fiefdoms whose interests had to be balanced before any major decision could be made. Upon the deaths of the older generation, there were far fewer constraints on the 34-year-old crown prince as he charted his path toward power.¹⁷

A major difference that separates MBS from the previous generation of leaders, all sons of the founder, Abd al-Aziz, is that MBS has no personal experience with the momentous events of the 1970s and that era's backlash against social and economic change. MBS instead has suggested repeatedly that Saudi Arabia changed for the worse in 1979. He portrayed that year as a pivotal one in which Islam became politicized through the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the fundamentalist takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. In a March 2018 60 Minutes interview, MBS explained to journalist Nora O'Donnell that, before 1979,

We [Saudis] were living a very normal life like the rest of the Gulf countries. Women were driving cars. There were movie theaters in Saudi Arabia. Women

*worked everywhere. We were just normal people developing like any other country in the world until the events of 1979.*¹⁸

Part of the threat posed by older Saudi critics (such as Jamal Khashoggi) to MBS and his narrative of returning Saudi Arabia to a “moderate” form of Islam is that they were able to draw upon firsthand experience of Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s to argue that there was no clean “before-and-after” dividing line. As Khashoggi noted in March 2018 at the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington, D.C., Saudi Islam was far from “moderate” before 1979.¹⁹ Indeed, in the early 1960s, then-Crown Prince Faisal threatened first to send in the army to disperse clerics opposing the first schools for girls. Faisal later authorized police to open fire on religious demonstrators protesting the introduction of television to Saudi Arabia. The latter incident, in 1966, proved to be fateful for Faisal, as one of those killed in the protest at the television station was a young member of the royal family, Khaled bin Musa'id Al Saud. Nine years later, Khaled's younger brother, Faisal bin Musa'id, assassinated his uncle, King Faisal, in revenge for his brother's death.²⁰

The royal family responded to the traumas of the late 1970s by becoming more tactically conservative. Under King Fahd, rulers assumed the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Fahd also facilitated the flow to Afghanistan of individuals such as Osama bin Laden, who sought a platform for the militant expression of religious beliefs. But the imprisonment of the *Sahwa* leaders in the 1990s showed that the Al Saud maintained the upper hand in the political relationship and was willing and able to rein in clerics when required.²¹

A RELIGIOUS REFORMER?

Mohammed bin Salman has promised economic, social, and religious reform. In the economic realm, he has (indeed) implemented policies that retract parts of the rentier bargain whereby subsidized

lifestyles were financed by the government's oil wealth. MBS reduced subsidies on water and petroleum and implemented a 5% value added tax. These policies are not popular, but they signal his commitment to reducing the public burden on the Saudi state and eventually diversifying the economy.²² Other high profile initiatives were delayed, such as the Aramco initial public offering, but may go forward eventually. On social reform, MBS permitted cinemas to open, and allowed women to drive and to leave Saudi Arabia without the permission of a male guardian. Nevertheless, the government maintains a somewhat ambiguous position on further reforms: in May 2019, a dry night club opened in Jeddah but quickly shut down, while a law to uphold public decency was passed by the Shura Council but has yet to be implemented. MBS must try to balance some citizens' demands for social change with others' concerns that the kingdom is losing its identity. But while the scope and results are mixed, MBS has certainly changed aspects of Saudi Arabia's economic and social status quo.

Yet in the religious arena, Mohammed bin Salman's stated intention to implement reform has not been followed by significant changes in policy. Prominent American media figures portrayed MBS as the first Saudi royal to stand up to the religious establishment and challenge the long-standing partnership between the House of Saud and Wahhabi clerics, citing a wave of arrests of prominent clerics in September 2017 and since. However, the Saudi government has largely ignored clerics that represent the core of the religious establishment, instead pursuing individuals who have a history of criticizing government policies, such as Salman al-Awda and other figures from the *Sahwa* movement.

Evidence that MBS is not challenging the Saudi religious establishment is his alliance with its most prominent institution, the Council of Senior Scholars. The president of the Council is Abdul-aziz Ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh, a member of the influential family of clerics descended from Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. One esteemed member of the council is Shaikh Saleh bin Mohammed

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al-Luhaydan, who in 2008 appeared to assert that the owners of satellite television stations could be executed for contributing to public immorality.²³ An outside observer might assume that a would-be religious reformer would require that the council members adopt a more progressive stance, but no member of the Council of Senior Scholars has been disciplined or required to address controversial rulings. Instead, the council has obliged MBS with religious edicts that support his policy decisions: they issued a fatwa against Qatar following the Saudi-led boycott, as well as against Canada after the Canadian government granted citizenship to the family of dissident Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who remains imprisoned as of September 2019. Observers of Saudi Arabia might take the Supreme Council's willingness to reverse its fatwa against women driving as an indication that MBS is pressuring the institution to adopt a more progressive stance. However, the religious establishment has consistently demonstrated that it will offer a religious justification for the decisions made by the House of Saud, making the fatwa reversal unsurprising. Meanwhile, MBS has refrained from censuring even the most controversial members of the Council of Senior Scholars, reinforcing the long-standing partnership between the religious establishment and the royals, while demonstrating the inequality of the relationship.

Many clerics outside the official religious establishment have altered their tone in order to ensure they do not risk imprisonment. In May 2019, A'id al-Qarni, a prominent figure associated with the *Sahwa* movement, apologized to Saudi society for the *Sahwa*. He expressed his support for MBS' plan to moderate Islam and condemned Qatar. Another well-known cleric is Mohamed al-Arefe, whose controversial stances, such as calling for jihad in Syria, earned him tens of millions of Twitter followers and a ban on travel to the United Kingdom. Since the wave of arrests in 2017, al-Arefe's Twitter account has focused on uncontroversial topics, such as the specificities of ritual washing prior

to prayer. al-Arefe was jailed by the Saudi regime in 2014 for criticizing the train line connecting Muslim holy sites in Mecca but has avoided critiquing the government since then. The regime moved to curtail his influence, suspending his Twitter account on December 28, 2018, and banning him from preaching. At the time of writing, he continues to Tweet using his non-Arabic Twitter profiles, and videos posted on Twitter showed him leading prayers. Another deeply conservative cleric is Abdurahman al-Barrak, who in 2010 called for the death penalty for those supporting gender mixing. Al-Barrak has also avoided imprisonment, despite the government's alleged effort to target controversial clerics. Issuing a conservative or even intolerant ruling is tolerated. Instead, those imprisoned are often individuals that have criticized the government. Several imprisoned clerics were among the 2011 petitioners seeking a constitutional monarchy, a representative parliament, and protections for minorities.

MBS has benefited from a lack of knowledge in the Western media about the views of influential Saudi clerics. Those who use their positions of religious authority to support the House of Saud face few barriers to reinforcing a deeply conservative form of Islam, whereas those who seek greater freedom of expression or political representation may find themselves the target of state repression.

SYMBOLISM, NOT SUBSTANCE

American commentators may view MBS' decision to allow women to drive and apply for government documents like passports without a male guardian as an indication that he is in the process of reforming Saudi Islam. However, this policy is consistent with other actions he has undertaken, which tend to focus on symbolic rather than substantive changes. MBS wishes to attract international investment, but he needs to change Saudi Arabia's image, especially after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Therefore, he is interested

in improving Saudi Arabia's international reputation without fundamentally altering the structures that maintain control by the House of Saud. He demonstrated this by arresting several female activists that pushed for the right to drive: although he implemented their demands, some of them remain imprisoned, as evidence that public displays of activism will be met with retaliation, even if the official position aligns with that of the demonstrators.

Gender equality is one of the areas where Saudi Arabia's reputation is especially poor, and the prohibition against female drivers was publicly visible. The Saudi state has gradually stripped away aspects of the guardianship system that previously had imposed more legal restrictions on women's rights than any other government in the world, with measures that allow Saudi women to acquire passports and travel abroad without the permission of a male relative, register births, marriages, and divorces, and act as guardian to children who are minors.²⁴ Other aspects of the guardianship system remain in place, however, and implementation of the latest changes has not been even across the board, with women taking to Twitter to complain that they could not order passports via the government's online portal.

The imprisonment of wealthy individuals in the Ritz-Carlton in November 2017 represents a similar policy that earned widespread media attention without causing fundamental changes. By targeting high profile citizens, even members of his own family, MBS assuaged the feelings of Saudi citizens who have watched in frustration as the top tier of Saudi society has benefited from decades of corruption and nepotism. The Ritz-Carlton affair was intended to appeal to young Saudis that see MBS as responsive to the wishes of his fellow Millennials, but also served to consolidate the Crown Prince's power.

Curtailing the "religious police" also constitutes a largely superficial change. While the religious police, or the mutawaeen, are no longer permitted to roam the streets and malls to punish those

they deem in violation of Islamic law, such powers have now been shifted to the ordinary police.²⁵ Where MBS has truncated the power of the religious establishment, it is to consolidate power into the central state and specifically, to boost his own control.

A trio of Arab and Islamic summits held in Mecca in late May 2019 demonstrate that despite social reforms, the Al Saud feel they can continue to leverage the religious soft power of the holy city to signal their role as political leaders. It remains to be seen whether Muslim allies will continue to follow Saudi Arabia's lead.

Some might argue that the lack of meaningful religious reform is not due to a lack of commitment on the part of the crown prince but is instead due to the deeply conservative nature of Wahhabi Islam. However, this view attributes causality to the religion, rather than focusing on the actors responsible for deploying the religion, namely the Saudi state.

Wahhabism, like any religious tradition, is not unchangeable and can be made to serve different agendas. Furthermore, similar to Islamic law or shariah, which is silent or inconclusive on many aspects of life, the writings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab are insufficient to provide a conclusive structure for government.²⁶ If an influential leader wished to deploy a more "moderate" form of Wahhabism, he or she could do so. Analysis of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's writings has demonstrated ways in which the 18th century cleric expressed views that would appear less radical than other interpretations. For example, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab prioritized the preservation of life and the family unit, even of those considered enemies. Other interpretations, such as those of the Maliki school, assert that individuals who had attacked the Muslim community lost all rights, whereas Ibn Abd al-Wahhab argued that the marital bonds must be preserved, even for attackers.²⁷ Like all religious traditions, Wahhabism can be interpreted to serve different agendas.

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CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Using religion as a tool of political control is consistent with past practice in Saudi Arabia. It does not appear that MBS is about to tamper with an approach that has formed a key basis for the projection of domestic stability and regional influence for decades.

As MBS has expanded and consolidated power within Saudi Arabia, he has shown himself willing to take on domestic rivals, using coercive power more aggressively than have past Saudi leaders. Reports that the public prosecutor is seeking the death penalty in the trial of Salman al-Awda and Awad al-Qarni, two former *Sahwa* leaders, as well as TV personality Ali al-Omari, illustrate the change. al-Awda faces trial for his public criticisms of the Saudi monarchy and for stirring public discord.²⁸ The cleric's silencing is less a factor of a religious crackdown than part of a broader suppression of critical voices that also claimed the life of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.

If he retains his position, MBS may yet evolve into a religious reformer. However, his behavior to date appears to demonstrate that he is motivated primarily by considerations of the consolidation of power. The quest for political authority in advance of becoming king has led MBS to take on clerical opponents, such as al-Awda, who represent an alternative political future, rather than their theological views or practices. Unless and until MBS makes any substantive move to the contrary, he will remain a political practitioner rather than a religious reformer.

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AUTHORS

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D., is a Baker Institute fellow for the Middle East. Working across the disciplines of political science, international relations and international political economy, his research examines the changing position of Persian Gulf states in the global order, as well as the emergence of longer-term, nonmilitary challenges to regional security.

Annelle R. Sheline, Ph.D., is the Zwan Postdoctoral Fellow, jointly appointed by the Baker Institute's Center for the Middle East and the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance. Her research focuses on religious authority in the Middle East, specifically the intersection of religious and national identities in the Arab monarchies.

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